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A mighty tempest for a thimble

With each new disclosure in The Great Bill Casey Prosecute-the-Press Story, the more it resembles a black hole in space, imploding upon itself like a galaxy of dying stars pulling everything into the void with it.

This looked at first like your classic \$29.98 Inside-the-Beltway Special. All the elements were present: a sinister CIA chief, national security leaks, Libyan radio intercepts (even typing the phrase is great fun), a particularly sordid cast of unlikely confederates (the prospect of The Washington Times and The Washington Post in the dock together was particularly delicious) and, above all, wronged virtue.

Especially wronged virtue.

If properly managed and massaged, this was a story that could be stretched out for days, even weeks: The CIA was trying to put The Post, The Times, The New York Times, Time and Newsweek in jail for printing state secrets. It would be quite a caper, and coming at a time when Lorton was already overflowing and a public scandal.

Senators would knock each other down to make courageous defenses of the First Amendment, Hon. Members of the House would decry Reaganite attacks on the newspapers, and editors from hither to yon would view with alarm all the way to summer.

The problem here, and in newsrooms all over town, was that it wasn't at all clear who said what to whom, who was actually mad at whom, and why Bill Casey, the sinister spook from Langley, was supposed to be so angry at this particular point in time, as they say in the bureaucracy.

Besides, Ben Bradlee does not make a believable virgin, wronged or otherwise. Even the editors at the television networks, who will buy anything that clatters and glitters, wouldn't buy this one.

On the other hand, the men in the government who were said to be hatching the thing that would

eat the media were not particularly forthcoming. Were they capable of a deed of such industrial-strength dumbness? Do not ask. Both Mr. Casey and Edwin Meese, the attorney general who would be the prosecutor in this exercise, fled to wherever it is that government officials go to hide until the blush of embarrassment fades. President Reagan sent his spokesman out to tell reporters that he didn't know anything about it, and besides, he was in Tokyo when it all started, so how could anyone blame him?

The front-page story in The Post raised more questions than it answered, but revealed more than it intended. By reading between the lines, you could imagine what happened when Mr. Casey sat down with Ben Bradlee and Leonard Downie, his managing editor:

The Post had a story about Mr. Casey's spies already in "the system," as newspapers call the computer in the basement. Bill Casey had heard about it. He didn't want it in the paper, either because it would compromise national security or because it would make life inconvenient for the CIA, and he told Messrs. Bradlee and Downie so, probably in something less than the respectful manner editors like to be spoken to.

They didn't like it, and the conversation quickly became "frank and cordial." Mr. Casey told them he was fed up with finding leaks in newspapers, and to make sure they couldn't accuse him of picking on The Post, he included the other suspects.

This pleased Mr. Bradlee, who on any other occasion would rather go down with the ship than get into a lifeboat with The Times, so great is his frustration for having failed so spectacularly to strangle this newspaper in its infancy. But now he could work Bill Casey over with the blunt instrument of Mr. Casey's own reckless design.

The Post's cooked story started life on Page One, and when nobody followed, retreated the second day to Page 3. By the end of the third day there was not enough tempest left to fill a teapot — not even a thimble.